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ABSTRACT

Responsibilities of the college or university governing board's student affairs committee include representing students' interests in all policy decisions, ensuring provision of adequate financial resources to support a comprehensive student affairs program, ensuring that board policies keep pace with students' diverse and changing needs, and promoting the campus as a community. It must keep the institution's mission as its guide and provide leadership for others focusing on students. The committee varies in size, demographics, and term length varies according to the institution's traditions and policies. Members should be familiar with currently enrolled students' interests and have a genuine concern for their welfare. The committee may meet with financial, audit, and/or academic affairs committees to discuss common concerns. Membership should include students, in voting or nonvoting capacities. Meetings should be held in conjunction with board meetings, It may be appropriate for the committee to meet with students in open session to learn of their concerns. The committee should interact with professional staff in student affairs; be conversant with student trends at both undergraduate and graduate levels; and be prepared to discuss policies and regulations affecting students, assessment and outcomes of student experience at the institution. It should plan for new student-life facilities, conduct strategic planning relating to enrollment, and be an advocate for students in the management and operation of the institution. (MSE)

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BOARD BASICS

EFFECTIVE COMMITTEES

THE STUDENT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

BY THOMAS G. GOODALE

HE 030 560

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ASSOCIATION OF GOVERNING BOARDS OF UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

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THE STUDENT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

It is the responsibility of the board of trustees to ensure that the institution ceaselessly focuses on the best interests of students. Typically, the board delegates some of this responsibility to the student affairs committee, which is charged with bringing student concerns, viewpoints, and needs to the attention of the board and officers of the institution. The student affairs committee—sometimes called the student life or student development committee—provides policy guidance to promote a safe and healthy environment that encourages academic success and ensures that students enjoy a high quality of life on campus.

The responsibilities of the student affairs committee fall into four broad areas:

- *representing students' interests in all policy decisions made by the board;*
- *ensuring the provision of adequate financial resources to support a comprehensive student affairs program;*
- *ensuring that board policies keep pace with students' changing needs, particularly as the institution enrolls a more diverse student body; and*
- *promoting the campus as a community.*

By agreeing to serve on the board, trustees have made a commitment to the mission and values of their institution. Today's college students have disparate needs. Some may be traditional 18-year-old freshmen; others may be older, hold full-time jobs, and have families.

THE STUDENT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE MUST KEEP THE MISSION OF THE INSTITUTION AS ITS GUIDE AND PROVIDE LEADERSHIP FOR OTHERS IN FOCUSING ON STUDENTS.

COMMITTEE CHARGE

The charge of the student affairs committee is to understand the impact of each unit of the institution on students and their goals for learning. Every matter the committee discusses and brings to the board's attention must focus on the impact of these issues and concerns on students.

The student affairs committee must keep the mission of the institution as its guide and provide leadership for others in focusing on students. In adhering to the mission of the institution and upholding the integrity of the academic enterprise, the student affairs committee should help board members and senior administrators broaden their conception of students as consumers of the educational and cultural offerings of the institution and as members of the campus community.

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, under the leadership of the late Ernest Boyer, conducted a nationwide study of campus life, culminating in a report, *Campus Life: In Search of Community*. Its recommendations, divided into six categories, form the basis of a plan for any board to ensure its campus is indeed a true community. In the report's prologue Boyer writes, "American higher education is, by almost any measure, a remarkable success.... Still, with all of our achievements, there are tensions just below the surface, and nowhere are the strains of change more apparent than in campus life."

The report recommends colleges and universities strive for these ideological, yet practical, goals:

- *A college or university is, above all, a* ***purposeful*** *community, a place where the intellectual life is central and where faculty and students work together to strengthen teaching and learning on the campus.* No one expects undergraduates to be academic "grinds." There must be relief, relaxation, and work. But a college is, above all, a place of learning, and improving campus life means having students who are "active learners."

It means having classes that are small enough for undergraduates to collaborate on projects, and it means having dedicated teachers who advise students, serve as mentors, and extend the intellectual life beyond the classroom.

- *A college or university, at its best, is an* ***open, honest*** *community, a place where freedom of expression is uncompromisingly protected and where civility is powerfully affirmed.* At the same time, offensive language must be vigorously denounced. But above all, an open, honest community means viewing language as a sacred trust and affirming that truth is the obligation we assume when we are empowered with the use of words.
- *A college or university also is a* ***just*** *community, a place where the dignity of all individuals is affirmed and where equality of opportunity is vigorously pursued.* If the nation's colleges and universities are to meet this challenge, prejudice in all its forms must be contested, and every college should develop a comprehensive plan to strengthen pluralism within a community of learning.
- *A college or university is, necessarily, a* ***disciplined*** *community, a place where individuals accept their obligations to the group and where well-defined governance procedures guide behavior for the common good.* All human communities have their dark side, and colleges are no exception. Substance abuse, especially involving alcohol, has been a continuing part of campus life. Still, a disciplined community means caring for one's health, and if state laws say alcohol use is illegal for those under 21, colleges should support the law, rather than ignore it. Students need models of courage, not equivocation.
- *A college or university is a* ***caring*** *community, a place where the well-being of each member is sensitively supported and where service to others is encouraged.* Communities within the community are essential, but they are not sufficient. Today, students and all others on the campus must connect with the institution as a whole, and the university should take the initiative to build a community, without a return to the rigidities of regulation.
- *A college or university is a* ***celebrative*** *community, one in which the heritage of the institution is remembered and where rituals affirming both tradition and change are widely shared.* Community must not only be created but recreated continually in institutions of higher education, and ritual has a vital role to play. These celebrations are critical, because one-quarter to one-half of undergraduates are new to a college each fall, and without traditions, continuity is lost.

Every community needs to nurture and care for its people. With the contraction in resources from government agencies and the restructuring of many of our society's institutions, it is incumbent on higher education not to lose its central mission—teaching and educating students. The student affairs committee can help the institution maintain its focus on providing high-quality education and developing skills.

Committee Structure

The student affairs committee will vary in size, demographics, and length of term in accordance with the traditions and policies of each institution. Trustees asked to serve on the student affairs committee should be familiar with current interests of enrolled students and have a genuine concern for their welfare.

As the cost of attending college has increased, many students have become "consumer advocates" and are quick to probe the institution's budget, ask questions about financial aid, and inquire about the efficiency of the administration and faculty. Consequently, the student affairs committee may meet with the finance, audit, and/or academic affairs committees to discuss common concerns.

The committee should, if possible, number students among its membership, in either a voting or nonvoting capacity depending on board policy and/or state law. Graduate, professional, and undergraduate students should be included, if applicable. Many boards will ask an elected student government officer and one or two others to serve; while others will go through an elaborate selection process to ensure as broad a representation as possible. If more than one student serves, their terms should be staggered.

All trustees, but particularly those on the student affairs committee, should receive *and read* the student newspaper. Committee members should keep abreast of the work of organized student government as well as special-interest groups. And they occasionally should be seen at student events and be recognized in their official capacities so that students know of their interest and accessibility.

Listening to students and engaging them in conversation reinforces their trust and confidence in a trustee's stewardship of their college or university. At the same time, members are cautioned not to be *too* accessible. They should not, for example, react directly to requests; instead, they should refer students to the appropriate administrative officers. The trustee's role should be of interested observer, not investigator.

AN ENLIGHTENED STUDENT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE CAN BE MOST EFFECTIVE WHEN IT SERVES AS A CONDUIT TO OTHER COMMITTEES.

COMMITTEE RESPONSIBILITIES

The responsibilities of the student affairs committee fall into four broad areas:

1. Representing students' interests in the board's policy-making activities. Boards make few decisions that do not affect students in some way. An enlightened student affairs committee can be most effective when it serves as a conduit to other committees. Not only does it take the lead in reviewing and developing policies that directly affect students—such as codes of student conduct and monitoring adherence to federal and state laws regarding disabilities and crime, for example—but it also sees that student interests are considered when the finance committee sets tuition and fees or the buildings and grounds committee reviews plans for a new campus recreation facility. Similarly, the working relationship between the student and academic affairs committees is key to providing appropriate student-support services, to promoting campus community, and to defining student learning outcomes. Consequently, occasional joint meetings with other board committees are crucial.

On occasion, the student affairs committee may find itself at odds with students or others on certain issues. This means board members occasionally may be forced to take an unpopular stand. In such instances, the welfare of the institution as a whole may be at stake, and the board will not be able to accommodate special interests.

The president, the senior student affairs officer, and the student affairs committee all must have a clear understanding of one another's roles, responsibilities, and expectations. Although the committee must be careful not to overstep its policy-making role to dabble in administration, it is wise to have "several heads" in discussion, rather than one or two individuals making decisions in isolation.

TRUSTEES ON THE STUDENT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE MUST MAKE AN EFFORT TO LEARN ABOUT THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF THESE "NEW STUDENTS" AND THE STRENGTHS DIVERSITY CAN OFFER THE CAMPUS.

2. Ensuring adequate resources for student affairs programs. Student services are integral, not ancillary, to the academic enterprise. Yet in times of financial exigency and retrenchment, some budget items that fall under this aegis often are viewed as expendable. Cutting student services may seem advisable in the short term, but doing so will have long-term negative results.

Recommendations to institute various "user fees" as a way to offset cost increases need to be examined for their effect on the overall student-services program. On the surface, such fees may seem cost effective, but they reflect poorly on the institution's commitment to student life. As the public has demanded more accountability from college and university officials, families and students demand and expect value for their money. Accordingly, trustees should expect accountability for the dollars the institution spends on student services.

How can the student affairs committee evaluate the effectiveness of student programs? In surveys the institution conducts of students' satisfaction, it might look at return rates in residence halls, students' involvement in campus activities and organizations, and use patterns in student health and counseling services. These often demonstrate students' satisfaction with the services and the school.

3. Keeping pace with the changing needs of students. Student demographics today are vastly different from those of a few years ago. Trustees on the student affairs committee must make an effort to learn about the special needs of these new students and the strengths diversity can offer the campus. The committee must be mindful of recruiting and retaining a diverse student body with attention to how well the institutional culture responds to the experiences of all students. Several useful reports and books on this subject are included in the list of resources on page 10.

The student affairs committee is responsible for ensuring that board policies keep pace with the needs of these students. Following are just a few of the issues the committee and the board may consider:

- *disabled student services,*
- *maintenance of student records,*
- *application of electronic technology to student learning,*
- *student information systems,*
- *campus crime statistics,*
- *alcohol and substance-abuse programs,*
- *mutual-aid pacts with municipal law enforcement,*
- *academic-support services,*
- *services for nontraditional students, and*
- *meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student body.*

4. Promoting the campus as a community. As the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching pointed out in *Campus Life: In Search of Community*, decision making at all levels must be based on high standards that are widely shared. The student affairs committee's responsibility to promote the campus as a community are based on the report's guidelines, discussed earlier in this booklet.

Committee Agenda

The student affairs committee should meet in conjunction with each board meeting. It may be appropriate for the committee to meet with students in open session to learn of their concerns and discuss salient issues and topics. Such meetings may be held in a common meeting room in a residence hall or in the student union or lounge.

It is important for the committee to interact with the professional staff in student affairs, be conversant on student trends at both the undergraduate and graduate level, and be prepared to discuss the following matters, among others:

- policies and regulations affecting students, such as the code of student conduct, and the rights, freedoms, and responsibilities of students;
- results from reports on the assessment and outcomes of the student experience at the institution;
- planned renovation and/or construction of new student-life facilities;
- strategic planning as it relates to the management of enrollment, such as admission, retention, student financial-aid practices and delivery, and the setting of tuition and fees; and
- monitoring the mission of the institution to ensure the committee is an advocate for the student in the management and operation of the institution.

From time to time, the committee may choose to invite student leaders to meet with them and discuss matters of import, especially if no students serve as members. The student media might be asked to cover the meetings so that the student body is made aware of the presence of such a committee and can know of its decisions and activities.

Conclusion

TRUSTEES MUST TEACH THE COMMUNITY THAT THE INSTITUTION IS A SANCTUARY OF SANCTUARIES FOR FREE THOUGHT.

What is the payoff? What will be the result of an informed trustee taking an active and resolute interest in the quality of students and the quality of student life? What results can there be in an informed constituency—people who believe in the integrity of governance and a well-understood delineation of roles and expectations? Accountability has long been a problem of semantics, particularly in post-secondary education.

The report, *An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education*, offers the following perspective:

What does our society need from higher education? It needs stronger, more vital forms of community. It needs an informed and involved citizenry. It needs graduates able to assume leadership roles in American life. It needs a competent and adaptable work force. It needs very high quality undergraduate education producing graduates who can sustain each of these goals. It needs more first-rate research pushing back the important boundaries of human knowledge and less research designed to lengthen academic résumés. It needs an affordable, cost-effective educational enterprise offering lifelong learning. Above all, it needs a commitment to the American promise—the idea that all Americans have the opportunity to develop their talents to the fullest. Higher education is not meeting these imperatives.

My own reaction is perhaps more simplistic. Trustee stewardship means, or should mean, leadership. Trustees must teach the community that the institution is a sanctuary of sanctuaries for free thought—and then work to make sure that it really is. The central task of the student affairs committee is to ensure that the board is aware of why the committee exists and for whom the institution exists.

Resources

Astin, Alexander W. *What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993. A study of how students change and develop in college and how colleges can enhance that development.

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. *Campus Life: In Search of Community.* Princeton, N.J.: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990. A study of social conditions on the campus.

Komives, Susan R., and Dudley B. Woodward, Jr. and Associates. *Student Services: A Handbook for the Profession.* Third edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996. An overview of the changing context of the student experience in higher education, the evolution of the role of student affairs professionals, and the ethics and philosophies that guide the practice of student affairs work.

Sandeen, Arthur. *The Chief Student Affairs Officer: Leader, Manager, Mediator, Educator.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991. A discussion of how senior student affairs officers can work together with their presidents and other top-level administrators to serve students better, enhance the quality of educational and cocurricular programs, and increase cooperation in the resolution of campus and community problems.

Wingspread Group on Higher Education. *An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education.* Racine, Wisc.: The Johnson Foundation, Inc., 1993. A collection of essays by leaders representing diverse social, professional, and economic perspectives examines what society needs from higher education.

BOARD BASICS

This publication is part of an AGB series devoted to strengthening the role of key standing committees of governing boards. Several assumptions underpin the series:

- The work of boards should be accomplished in committee. An effective committee system will enhance the productivity of full board meetings.
- The committee structure of any board should mirror the full range of its responsibilities as a legal, corporate entity. That is, the committee organization should cover the oversight roles expected of trustees.
- Although there is no optimum committee system, certain principles and procedures should prevail: The board's bylaws or other operating policy should include a clear, comprehensive statement of responsibility for each standing committee. Each committee should be staffed by an appropriate administrative officer; a trustee or regent should serve as chair. No trustee should serve on more than two active committees, preferably one—excluding the executive committee.
- Before scheduled meetings, each committee member should receive a concise, well-conceived meeting agenda and relevant background information prepared by the committee chair and staff. Committees are responsible for recommending decisions and actions to the full board.
- As committee members seek additional information to fulfill their responsibilities, it is important to strike a balance between "too much" and "too little." Committee members must guard against requesting overly detailed information to avoid the appearance of becoming embroiled in administration or overburdening it. Before members make information requests, perhaps they would be well-served by asking if all such requests contribute to the committee's and the board's responsibilities for reviewing, setting, or approving institutional policies.

The *Effective Committees* set of booklets comprises publications on the following committees: investment, buildings and grounds, academic affairs, student affairs, finance, development, trustees, audit, and executive. It is part of the AGB **Board Basics Series**. AGB and the authors welcome comments and suggestions to improve this publication and others in the series.

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